

Testimony of
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State of California
Little Hoover Commission

Public Hearing on Emergency Preparedness
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Commissioners, Distinguished Witnesses, and Members of the Public:

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Christopher Godley, and I am the Emergency Services Manager for the County of Marin. I have served as an emergency manager with local government for 10 years. Recently, I served as a local government representative on the Advisory Task Force that developed the California Statewide Emergency Management Strategic Plan.

First, I applaud your Commission's proactive role in reviewing and assessing the subject of public safety. With the many issues and challenges facing our political leaders, it is often easy to forget that the core responsibility of government is to ensure the safety and security of its citizens.

Since 9/11, public safety agencies have undergone a sea change in the way they prepare for disaster. A great deal of progress has been made in increasing capability, developing coordinated plans, and working through very complex technology issues. Large sums of money have been spent improving our ability to prevent and respond to terrorist attacks. This is in line with our duty as public servants - we must adapt and prepare to meet new threats. However, the state of emergency management in California is not as good as it could – or should – be.

I have grave concerns about regional preparedness and response capabilities in California. I believe that the statewide collection of emergency management programs is in danger of failing. I fear that all of the considerable efforts underway in local agencies throughout the state may well be in vain without the State of California's full commitment to its role in emergency management. The majority of issues outlined in your Commission's reports of 2002 regarding public safety remain unresolved and almost none of your recommendations have been implemented.

A great deal has been made of California's "experience" with disaster. This experience is believed to translate into real operational effectiveness. However, while dedicated and competent professionals remain, this experience is fading quickly – the Central Valley floods occurred 7 years ago, the Northridge Earthquake, 11, and Loma Prieta, 15. Experience is as perishable as it is invaluable.

I should point out that the new Director of the State Office of Emergency Services as well as the proposals contained in the new Statewide Strategic Plan give me some hope. However, the current organization of state government and the relative lack of resources present formidable obstacles to real progress. California remains at significant risk.

I offer the following observations in response to your questions:

- 1) *Please describe concerns you have regarding regional and metropolitan area planning and coordination in the event of a large scale emergency. Please enumerate progress that has been made and further steps that are needed for improving regional emergency response.*

Under the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS), the State of California has retained the authority for coordinating response efforts at the regional level. The State, therefore, has the responsibility to prepare to carry out that function. *At the present level of effort, I believe that SEMS will fail at the Regional level.* Due to a lack of training and exercising, I believe that, during a truly major disaster, SEMS could also fail at the State level.

For example, the Office of Emergency Services (OES) Coastal Region office has seen a 50% reduction in staffing over the last three years. The Coastal Region Emergency Operations Center (REOC) has not conducted a complete functional exercise in the last 8 years. The majority of REOC staff are not identified prior to an event, let alone trained.

However, there is some hope that regional collaboration in the Bay Area will improve with the major initiative currently underway to hire a contractor who will develop several regional plans, conduct regional training and manage several large exercises. The recent re-appointment of a regional director and new efforts to make OES more effective also bode well for the future.

The State of California must commit resources – staff and funding – sufficient to meet its obligations to coordinate regional response efforts. State OES must be empowered to develop and manage full regionally-based emergency management programs. These programs must include regional planning, training of state agencies, identification and training of Regional Emergency Operations Center (REOC) staff, enhanced communications and a full series of tabletop, functional and full-scale exercises. Anything short of this commitment presents a significant risk of failure.

- 2) *Please describe your experience working on the state Office of Emergency Services' strategic plan. Is the strategic plan integrated with the other California agencies that would respond to large-scale emergencies? These agencies include the Office of Homeland Security, the Department of Health Services, the Emergency Medical Services Administration, and the National Guard.*

The California Statewide Emergency Management Strategic Plan is a significant recent accomplishment. The Plan was developed by the Office of Emergency Services with the notable involvement and solid contribution by key state agencies. The process was very positive with a strong outreach component, very high levels of communication among the participants and a deliberate but well organized schedule.

For too long in California, we have formed ad hoc Blue Ribbon Committees and Special Task Forces that point out what went wrong in the last disaster response. This Strategic Plan, instead, breaks out of that mindset and very clearly describes where we need to go in order to prevent such failures in the future.

This plan, if fully implemented, represents California's best chance at refocusing and making effective its emergency management programs. The plan is currently being submitted to the Governor for final approval.

3) Do you recommend consolidating public safety and homeland security under one entity at the state level? If so, what do you anticipate the benefits would be to local first-responders? Which state agencies do you recommend be consolidated?

In 2002, the President created the Office of Homeland Security to serve as a coordinating point for the various federal agencies and programs that were then focused on the new threat of terrorism. This approach failed to deliver the desired results and so Congress created the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). DHS brings together many of the agencies that have an operational role and require closer coordination and collaboration.

In California, following the example of the federal government, Governor Davis created the California Office of Homeland Security by executive order in 2002. However, California did not take the next step of consolidating response and operational agencies as the federal government did. Although a step in the right direction, this action by the state has failed to translate into an increase in operational readiness and response.

This situation with both an Office of Homeland Security and an Office of Emergency Services has created tension and confusion at the state and local levels of government. Roles and responsibilities often overlap, authority is unclear and neither agency has the clear ability to influence other state agencies. This situation has also created additional demands on local emergency managers in terms of administrative requirements and coordination of preparedness and response efforts.

Currently, a part of the Governor's California Performance Review (CPR) suggests that cost savings and an increased effectiveness could be realized if state public safety agencies were to be consolidated into one Department of Public Safety and Homeland Security.

The Marin County Sheriff's Department has not taken a position on this proposal as there is uncertainty as to whether or not the plan, as currently written, will better enable a response although it clearly offers the opportunity for cost savings.

The California Emergency Services Association (CESA) has adopted a resolution that supports the Governor's efforts to reorganize state public safety agencies into one Department of Public Safety and Homeland Security. I would note that this is the only resolution proposed by CESA in the last eight years.

CESA feels that the proposed reorganization offers many benefits if approached deliberately and with care. The collaborative benefits before a disaster are significant and the ability to coordinate response efforts during a disaster would be radically improved. Local first responders would find it easier and more effective working with one agency. The new department would provide a better and more effective organization for addressing multi-discipline issues such as interoperable communications. The ability to influence other state and even federal agencies would be considerably strengthened.

CESA does disagree with the CPR proposal in on one issue. CESA strongly endorses the critical and unique executive function of the Office of Emergency Services and would propose that any reorganization maintain OES's ability to leverage state agencies and resources.

- 4) *What has been your experience with emergency preparedness exercises that include state, local and federal agencies? In what ways could local community emergency preparedness benefit if California participated in a federal exercise similar to the TOPOFF exercises?*

Emergency preparedness exercises in California are almost universally conducted at the local government or agency level. One exception is the Golden Guardian series of exercises which simulate operations at the state level. Although there is a request to use an earthquake scenario for the 2006 exercise, Golden Guardian activities are funded by Homeland Security grants and focus solely on the terrorism threat. This exclusive spotlight on the terrorism threat is also being mirrored at the local level primarily due to the availability of terrorism grant funding.

The Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program (HSEEP) currently underway is well funded although it is focused primarily on first responder tactical capabilities and does not fully address emergency management issues.

The federal government has conducted three large, full-scale Top Officials (TOPOFF) exercises in the last six years. These exercises are a truly monumental event involving thousands of local, state and federal responders, and elected officials. To date, California has declined to participate in this program. The magnitude of the threats combined with the sheer size of the state should warrant California's participation in a future exercise. Although the outlay of staff and financial resources would be truly significant, the ability to really put local and state planning and capabilities to the test would be worth the cost. California will be tested one day – whether it is in an exercise environment or in response to a real event is a decision we should make now.

- 5) *What are your recommendations for improving emergency first-responder communication among state and local entities? Have the communications dysfunctions outlined in the San Diego Fires Blue Ribbon Commission report been resolved?*

The majority of communications problems outlined in the San Diego Fires Blue Ribbon Commission report have not been resolved and continue to pose a significant threat to first responders. Most notably, no additional mutual aid radio frequencies have been identified or placed into service statewide.

At this point, state agency first responders, by and large, cannot communicate with local first responders. Although some limited voice radio frequencies are available, the sheer variety and number of state and local radio systems make reliable connections in a major event very difficult – as was the case in the San Diego Fires. Recent Homeland Security grant purchases of communications equipment have only slightly eased the pressure on obtaining and fielding additional portable radios for incoming mutual aid providers.

Under the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS), the state of California has retained the authority – and thus the responsibility – for coordinating and supporting regional and state-level response efforts. This responsibility extends into the arena of interoperable voice and data communications. However, to undertake this effort, OES would have to dramatically increase its staff and resources. The fact that there are only five OES Telecommunications staff that serve the entire State of California highlights this relative lack of priority.

6) *What is your experience regarding how California is coordinating emergency preparedness funds from Homeland Security, the Centers for Disease Control, the Health Resources Services Administration and the Department of Defense? Do you believe that this process ensures that the top priorities for protecting the public will be met?*

The current process of Homeland Security grant funding presents significant issues for both state and local government. The majority of current efforts go into simply obtaining and administering grants - very little time and energy is directed at prioritizing and coordinating planning, training, and other emergency preparedness activities. The administrative requirements force emergency managers to focus on spending money rather than on increasing capability.

Although the vast majority of grant funds are going to local first responders and emergency managers, the grant programs recently moved from OES to OHS. OHS has an extremely limited interaction with local first responders while OES has a long-standing set of relationships with these agencies and organizations. OHS could do better to maximize the experience and expertise already present in OES as well as significantly increase to communication and collaboration with OES.

Separate and uncoordinated grant funding streams exist for emergency management and public health. These grants are passed down to local governments without any significant coordination or collaboration at the state level. This creates confusion and some conflict at the local level when differing outlooks and priorities compete.

The State of California would be better served by consolidating all homeland security grants administration into one agency. This would provide for better and more accurate communication with local governments and state agencies. This would also provide opportunities for deliberate, strategic collaboration across disciplines. Homeland security grant funding is too valuable to allow for piecemeal execution.

In closing I would like to thank you again for examining these issues and for this opportunity to provide my thoughts to your Commission. I am happy to answer any further questions you might have.